

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

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### Witness Testimony

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#### TESTIMONY

By

Albert E. McKee

Commissioner

Skamania County, Washington

Washington Timber Counties Chairman

County, Schools 25% Fund

Stabilization

to

The Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

May 20,1999

My Testimony this morning is in behalf of all counties negatively impacted by unreasonable restrictions which prevent the wise use of those natural resources located within their boundaries. Most specifically, I represent Skamania County, Washington. a highly impacted timber county located in the Columbia River Gorge about 150 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean and about 50 miles east of the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area. I am also the chairman of the timber counties of the State of Washington and speak in behalf of the counties from that group whose ability to meet the need for expanded levels of community service has suffered because of decreased timber harvest on Federal lands. As a former public school teacher and administrator I also speak in support of school districts that will suffer greatly as federal timber harvest revenues decrease or eventually cease.

Because my own county, Skamania County, is impacted more severely than any other federal timber county in the State of Washington by the owl rule and subsequent reductions in federal timber harvest and revenue, I will use it as an example to illustrate the types of concerns facing the afore mentioned entities.

Skamania County straddles a 55 mile segment of the Cascade Mountain Range, which includes Mt. St.

Helens, on the north shore of the Columbia River in Southwest Washington. At least 90% of the county's slightly more than one million acres is forest land of which approximately 90% is federal and located primarily on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The southern most portion of the County along the Columbia River, approximately 50% of the County's total private land base, is located in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

The population of Skamania County is approximately 10,000. A population increase of 24% over the past 10 years is primarily the result of immigration from the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area. The county, especially in the western portion, increasingly serves as a residential community for the metropolitan area. Nearly 60% of our total county workforce now commutes outside Skamania County for employment.

For many decades, timber was the economic mainstay of Skamania County, directly through logging and milling and indirectly through Forest Service employment. Timber harvests on federal lands in Skamania County have dropped from historical highs near 350 mbf annually to approximately 40 mbf by 1998. Between 1985 and 1998, 500 timber jobs were lost in Skamania County. Timber employment decreased from 690 jobs to 190 jobs, representing a 72% decline. The county had already lost over 130 jobs between 1979 and 1985 because of a downturn in the plywood market.

The President's Forest Plan of 1993 has created a scary situation for Skamania County and its local school districts. Fortunately, Congress did pass the Spotted Owl guarantee which has provided a badly needed safety net through the year 2003. This year, if it were not for the Spotted Owl guarantee, our county and the schools would have split \$1,864,480.49. Under the Spotted Owl guarantee the County and the schools received \$6,520,848.32 to split between them. This represents approximately 25% of Skamania County's total annual revenue.

Because of the Owl Guarantee, the impacts of reduction in harvest have not hit counties like Skamania all at once, but when the guarantee is gone the downward spiral will accelerate out of control for some of us. Because of large percentages of federal ownership and impacts of federal environmental and endangered species legislation, many counties do not have the tax base or the ability to develop industrially in a way that is necessary to sustain traditional levels of service at a time when the need is for increased levels of service.

In Skamania County 11.7% of our land base is taxable with only 1.5% taxed at full market value. The current tax base provides less than 20% of our total revenue budget. We recognize that our situation is unique, but also understand that others are also unique and, because of similar circumstances to ours, may be negatively impacted as much or even more than Skamania County.

In Skamania County we support wise and prudent management and stewardship of the national forests within our boundaries, with the hope that they would continue to provide a much needed benefit for our county and its public schools. We say this recognizing that much needs to be done to improve the management of our forests, but believing strongly that the task of prudent management and local community benefit from such management are not mutually exclusive.

We recognize that some of our friends in the Pacific Northwest are leaning toward supporting the concept of decoupling and some are strongly in support of more emphasis on increasing timber harvest within a wise and prudent management plan. It seems that each county is affected somewhat differently, but all share the common theme of being impacted by what is happening with federal lands. For these reasons and because we think wise and prudent management of National Forests should include an increased level of harvest

activity in our county we favor an either/or approach similar to the one proposed by the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition. We believe that such an approach would lead to a workable solution to the problems that affected counties are struggling with.

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#### County, Schools 24% Fund Stabilization

1. Skamania County just one example of the way counties can be heavily impacted by restrictions which prevent the wise use of natural resources within their boundaries.
2. Timber harvests on federal lands in Skamania County have dropped from highs near 350 mbf annually to approximately 40 mbf in 1998.
3. When the Owl Guarantee is gone the downward spiral will accelerate out of control for some of us.
4. Because of large percentages of federal ownership and impacts of federal environmental and endangered species legislation, many counties do not have the tax base or the ability to develop industrially in a way that is necessary to sustain traditional levels of service at a time when the need is for increased levels of service.
5. In Skamania County we support wise and prudent management and stewardship of the national forests.
6. We support an either/or approach similar to the one proposed by the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition.

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